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HYPOCRITE, ACTOR, POLITICIAN ...

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In an astonishingly evocative scene from Bertolt Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*—his 1941 allegory about the rise of Nazism and in particular its “charismatic,” demagogical leader—Arturo Ui receives lessons in performing political speeches, lessons in “electrocution” as the play calls them, from a has-been actor. This scene can be read as part of a long genealogy of meta-theatricality, where the medium of performance itself is in many ways quoting the *longue durée* of the anti-theatrical legacy.

What is Brecht doing here in injecting this meditation on Nazism with an equally powerful meditation on the impact of theatricality itself? Is he in some way undermining his own play? Is the art of acting itself open to such powers of manipulation and corruption? And if this washed-out actor can give lessons to a would-be dictator, how are we as the spectators of this scene protected from being manipulated by the play itself? Who has the last laugh here? Is there ethically and politically good acting and bad acting? In conflating the roles of the actor and the politician, this scene foregrounds the constitutive relationships between the two. In a sense, this taps into the long-standing interface between the “performative” as a philosophical/critical category and actual performance conventions. Does the style/manner/form of presentation and performance matter as much as the content itself? At the same time, the scene also quotes the equally entangled relationship between theatre and democracy, as Brecht is primarily concerned with the power of theatre to unmask false democracy.

Brecht's own proposal of Epic Theatre does offer some responses to the above questions and purports to expose some of the pretences or failures of democracy itself. What I would like to reflect on for the purposes of this brief excursion is the long tradition that this scene quotes and enacts on the stage. This is a tradition as old as Plato's fear of theatre and its democratic potential, coined in the brilliant term he uses in *Laws*, “theatrocracy,”¹ revived in the anti-theatrical tracts of the seventeenth century as evidenced in William Prynne's magisterial *Histriomastix* (2017 [1633]): *the Player's Scourge, or Actor's Tragedy*, which at once looks back to Plato and forward to Antonin Artaud (and the Theatre as the Plague), and enacted in the heretical Marxism of Guy Debord's manifesto *The Society of the Spectacle* (1995 [1967]).² These three diverse but iconic tracts share

1 See Plato (1999:1225–1513). Plato writes: “By compositions of such a kind and discourse to the same effect, they naturally inspired the multitude with a contempt of musical law, and a conceit of their competence as *judges*. Thus our once silent audiences have found a voice, in the persuasion that they understood what is good and bad in art; the sovereignty of the best, aristocracy, has given way to an evil sovereignty of the audience, a *theatrocracy*.” (my emphasis)

2 For the ways anti-theatricality is articulated in Renaissance England as part of the puritanical debate see Prynne (2017 [1633]). For insightful reflections on this and on Plato's *theatrocracy* see Fisher (2017).

the fear and loathing of theatre and spectacularization more generally. These instances of the fear of theatre's supplementarity, its ability to stand in and for the world but also to always not fully or truthfully represent it, all bear distinctively Platonic traces. Indeed, we could claim that Brecht himself might, in some ways, be read as a Neo-Platonist, only for him the power of theatre to move us, to make us feel at home or strange is not a negative quality. I would like to tease out some of these constellations of ideas that link the political to the theatrical and spectacular through a reading of the function of the actor.

In its classical Greek etymology, a *hupocrites* is not someone that tries to deceive us, that says one thing and believes another, that sways us through the power of language and acting. The Greek term for actor, *hupocrites*, refers to the actors who were separate from the chorus, and responded to it; they were the answerers, both under (*hupo*) and separate (*krinein*) from the chorus (with Thespis as the first to enact this, according to the story or myth of the primal scene of the genesis of theatre). And the term has been read as morally neutral. I am not convinced, however, that it was all that neutral. If we add to the term *krinein* its other connotations of judgment and possibly even its later rendition as critique, then one possible reading of *hupocrites* is that this is a performer who is indeed under constant judgment, in dramatic contests, as an ideal or flawed representative citizen of the democracy that was structurally constitutive of the art-form of theatre itself. It is indeed this ability of theatre to create in the audience what Plato considered an illusion of judgment, that he found so abhorrent ("a conceit of their competence as *judges*. Thus, our once silent audiences have found a voice," as he states).³ In its Christian rendition, this anti-theatrical prejudice associated with acting acquires all the negative connotations of deceitfulness and manipulation. In Matthew (23:1–39), Jesus lists the seven woes of hypocrisy and recognises the "bad faith" of the Pharisees by accusing them of manipulating language, "Why are you trying to trip me up, you hypocrites?." However, classical Greek acting was not about pretending to be something one was not, it was about performing that role, enacting it, demonstrating it through very specific conventions like masks (which later also become metaphors of deception). So, when Aristotle uses the verb *hupokrinesthai*, he is not stating that an actor is pretending to be a king or any other role (literally a pretender), but that he (and it was a "he" as the classical Greek stage only featured male actors) is demonstrating, showing the function or role of the king, and of kingship itself. There is no conflation of actor and role, and the term *hupocrites* in the Greek sense enacts that distance, separation, that crisis/critique (*krinein*) that can act as a safeguard against manipulation.

Fear of hypocrisy in its post-Christian sense always parallels fears about the limitations of democracy itself (hence the scene mentioned above in Brecht's play). Is democracy a

For the Modernist articulation of anti-theatricality see amongst others, Artaud (1976). In its most radical and aphoristic mode, this critique of theatre's distorting powers appears in Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Written in 1967, it came to act as the manifesto of Situationism, expressing the repudiation of the spectacle as the quintessential political tool of capitalism.

3 See note 1.

hypocritical system that purports one thing and practises another? What happens when politicians are “pretenders” and claim to be the king rather than demonstrate a role, or occupy a position? The political theorist and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis calls democracy “a tragic regime” (1997:84–107)⁴ stressing that in a democracy there is no external force or *archē*. It is a regime of self-limitation, and possibly hence the tendency toward *hubris*, as limits—moral/political/aesthetic—almost invariably invite transgression. For Plato, philosophers are the ideal intellectuals/rulers of his ideal city. Democracy was problematic because “poets” were its intellectuals and theater was its phantasmic other. When Shelley pronounced poets to be the “unacknowledged legislators of the world,” he was articulating a defense of poetry but also of theatricality. Could actors occupy such a privileged position in a democracy? If democracy is somehow inherently tragic and theatrical, are not politicians its main actors? And what is at stake when the performative function of politics is conflated with the performance of politics itself? Perhaps that is why the most unconvincing and difficult emotion for a politician to portray is sincerity itself.

If democracy is a tragic regime, then theatre and theatricality more generally could be its primary aesthetic trope. And I refer to the aesthetic here in its Greek sense (*aesthesis*), as located and experienced through the senses, through the body. Just as tragedy is not political theory or simply an exposition of ideas, perhaps democracy too has an aesthetic dimension that makes it more open-ended and ambivalent. Perhaps this is one of the reasons the classical Greeks considered tragedy to be the great school of Athenian democracy, one that at once celebrated its achievements but also highlighted its exclusions (women and slaves, for example). Aesthetic education in this sense is also political education. Interestingly, as Castoriades claims, tragedy was central to both experiences.

As an example, I would like to propose a reading of a scene from Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* where aesthetic form is integral to its politics and to its modern readability (Castoriades also reads the *History* as an example of tragic form). I would like to focus on the famous Melian Dialogue that has become such a canonical text for contemporary International Relations. It is significant that it is written as a dialogue, and follows a theatrical structure. It is as if at this catastrophic moment when Athenian democracy is at its worst and its limits are tested, Thucydides transforms from a historian into a poet (as playwrights were called in his time). What more powerful way to voice a critique of Athenian democracy than through its finest aesthetic form, the tragedy. This offers Thucydides and us the power of *krinein* of judgment through distance, through separation, and not solely through identification and empathy. Or to phrase it differently by referring to Aristotle’s famous definition of tragedy, we experience the catastrophe of Melos through both pity/*eleos* (empathy, identification) and fear/*phobos* (awe, wonder, distance). *Eleos* and *phobos* are fundamental emotions generated by actors/*hupocrites*, but they are also formal tropes of reception. Too much empathy can easily dissolve into narcissism (as in the mythological character who could only identify through sameness)

4 For an insightful meditation on this idea, see Gourgouris (2014:809–818).

and too much distance can end up in complete alienation (otherness). And these tropes have generated aesthetic forms of reception, forms of reception that also come with a political dimension. We as readers are transformed into spectators, watching a tragedy enacted, indeed one whose themes would also be addressed in an actual tragedy performed in Athens in the same year as the catastrophe of Melos, Euripides' *Trojan Women*. Our experience of reading is transformed into a performative event.

So the parallels that Brecht examines between lessons in acting and lessons in political economy are not coincidental. In a sense, the most democratic politician would occupy the *gestus* of the Brechtian actor or the Athenian *hupocrites*, where being and demonstrating are not conflated and the performance of politics is always aware of its own performativity (and accordingly the least democratic actor/politician like Brecht's Arturo Ui would be one who is trying to convince us that they are sincere, "real"). Brecht wrote the play in dark times, when there was much at stake in the political ramifications of theatricality. In our own times, when the term performativity is sometimes used ahistorically and apolitically, it is perhaps equally important to stress that it comes with a long and distinguished genealogy of both form and content.⁵ And to repeat a much quoted aphorism from that play, these matters have an added urgency today, as "the bitch that bore him is in heat again."

Olga Taxidou is Professor of Drama and Performance Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Her research focuses on the interactions between modernism and classicism, especially in the theatre arts. She is the Series Editor of The Edinburgh Critical Studies in Modernism, Drama, and Performance, and her books include: The Mask: a Periodical Performance by Edward Gordon Craig (1998); Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning (2004); Modernism and Performance: Jarry to Brecht (2007). She is co-editor (with V. Kolocotroni) of Modernism: an Anthology of Sources and Documents (2000) and its sister volume, The Edinburgh Dictionary of Modernism (2018). She also works on adaptations of classical Greek Tragedies, the most recent of which, Medea, was produced in New York (March 2018) by Mabou Mines Theatre Company, directed by Lee Breuer.

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